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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000425

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KCRM KDEM KJUS AM
SUBJECT: PROMINENT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST ATTACKED

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Classified By: Pol-Econ Steve Banks, reasons 1.4 b,d

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On May 21 the leader of a marginal right-wing political party with reputed connections to Armenia's National Security Service, assaulted Mikhail Danielian, one of Armenia's most prominent human rights activists, shooting him with an air pistol. While multiple people witnessed the attack, the attacker has yet to be arrested or charged. The attacker has gone public with his version of events that claims he was victimized by Danielian. The attacker has also warned the international community against "politicizing" the incident. Reaction from the media has been mixed, with various pro-government outlets disagreeing on the interpretation of events. Danielian was lightly wounded in the attack. END SUMMARY.

DANIELIAN ATTACKED

¶2. (C) Mikhail Danielian told Emboffs the attack took place when he was riding in a taxi with two of his colleagues in downtown Yerevan the afternoon of May 21. When his taxi stopped at a traffic light, a car pulled up behind and started to honk loudly and repeatedly. Tigran Urikhanian, the young leader of the marginal ultra-right "Armenian Progressive Party," got out of the car and approached the taxi. (NOTE: Urikhanian has a well-established reputation for staging provocative pro-government incidents, and is reputed to be connected to the security services. In 2002, when the GOAM took the last independent TV station off the air, Urikhanian organized a group of supporters to rally against Armenian civil society NGOs who had come to the station's support. END NOTE.) When Urikhanian saw Danielian, he began swearing at him and punched Danielian through the open window. Danielian got out of the taxi and a heated argument ensued. Danielian then claims that, without warning, Urikhanian shot him with an air gun, first in his chest and then into the air. Danielian sustained light wounds on his chest and neck as a result. (NOTE: The weapon apparently uses a compressed air charge to fire a capsule, usually filled with tear gas or something similar. END NOTE)

¶3. (C) After being shot, Danielian immediately called the police, an ambulance, and Artur Sakunts, his friend and colleague from the Vanadzor-based Helsinki Citizens' Assembly. According to Sakunts, upon his arrival a few minutes later he saw Danielian with his coworkers and a group of men associated with Urikhanian standing further away. He witnessed that one man from the group approached Danielian

asking to talk to him in private. When Danielian refused, Urikhanian accosted Danielian, loudly calling him a CIA spy and "defender of gays," and then punched Danielian again in the face. Egged on by Urikhanian, the other man also hit Danielian.

¶4. (C) According to Sakunts, Urikhanian then rushed to call the police even before Danielian had managed to, alleging that he himself had been attacked and for that reason instigated the fight with Danielian afterwards. Shortly thereafter, the police arrived and took Danielian to the station, while the attacker arrived by his own vehicle. (NOTE: This is the second physical assault that Danielian has suffered in recent memory. An unabashed critic of the authorities' flagging record on human rights, Danielian was severely beaten in 2004 by four assailants, none of whom were ever apprehended. END NOTE.)

ORDEAL AT POLICE STATION

¶5. (C) Emboffs went to the police station to check on Danielian's welfare, where we spoke with Sakunts and parliament MPs from the opposition Heritage party who arrived later. All expressed serious concern about the attack on Danielian, his health condition, and the response of the police. Danielian, who periodically called Sakunts from his cell phone inside the station, said that police would not release him and his colleague, and that it was unclear what their response would be. At one point, the police tried to take Danielian's fingerprints, but he refused, stating that he was the victim in the assault. While in police custody, Danielian's blood pressure rose considerably, and an ambulance was called twice to treat him. Employees of the National Security Service were also spotted coming in and out

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of the station during this time.

¶6. (C) After about four hours, Danielian was allowed to leave the police station, but appeared visibly ill. Government investigators who escorted him outside assured the gathered people that Danielian was being treated as a victim of an attack, but would have to undergo a medical forensic examination at a medical facility for evidentiary purposes. Danielian had the forensic examination on May 22, but examiners have not announced any results yet. Police have also yet to contact Danielian since the attack. And in spite of the assurances by government investigators the day before, on May 22 the police press office published an initial incident report which suggested that Danielian had instigated the fight and hit Urikhanian before the letter shot at him.

ATTACK FOLLOWS DANIELIAN'S OUTSPOKENESS

¶7. (C) The attack against Danielian coincidentally came one day after he gave an interview to the A1Plus opposition online news agency. (NOTE: This is the successor media outlet to the very A1Plus TV station forced off the air in 2002 that Urikhanian had defended the authorities on. END NOTE.) During the interview, Danielian raised concerns that the recent murder of an Armenian soldier -- allegedly by a sniper from Azerbaijan's armed forces -- could in fact have been a hazing-related death. (NOTE: The Ministry of Defense press service reported the death on May 15, citing that an Armenian soldier had been shot to death on an unspecified border with Azerbaijan. Septel to follow. END NOTE.) Danielian also criticized President Sargsian and the perceived lack of progress in the GOAM's response to PACE resolution 1609 that called for urgent measures to de-escalate political tensions in the country after the disputed presidential election.

ATTACKER SPINS STORY

¶ 8. (C) The Vanadzor-based Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Human Rights Watch, and over 30 prominent Russian human rights activists responded quickly, pledging their solidarity, condemning the violence against Danielian, and calling upon the authorities to hold Urikhanian responsible for his acts. In the meantime, Urikhanian has been actively giving interviews in which he alleges that he was "saving" the honor of female passersby whom Danielian had, he claimed, offended from the window of the taxi. (NOTE: We find this allegation preposterous, based on our knowledge of Danielian. END NOTE.) Urikhanian has also threatened, in his numerous public statements since the incident, to organize protest rallies in front of the offices of international organizations -- especially mentioning the U.S. Embassy -- that might try to politicize what was otherwise an ordinary scuffle between two men.

MEDIA REACTION MIXED

¶ 9. (SBU) Pro-government media outlets have sent mixed signals about the view of the authorities on the attack, and how vigorously -- or not -- they will prosecute the case. Some of these outlets heavily quote Urikhanian and his far-fetched version of events; some give equal say to both sides; and one pro-government newspaper (the Russian version of the state-run, twice-weekly "Republic of Armenia") condemned Urikhanian.

¶ 10. (C) This incident came up in a meeting Poloff had with Yerevan Press Club chairman Boris Navasardian May 23. Navasardian believed the incident was simply the outrageous behavior of the hot-headed Urikhanian, not anything deliberately orchestrated in advance. He commented, however, that President Sargsian is so badly in need of political allies that he does not dare punish even such a small-fry supporter as Urikhanian, for fear of alienating others like him. Navasardian predicted that the case would eventually be dropped.

COMMENT

¶ 11. (C) We have no reason to question Danielian's side of the story, given our professional relationship with him over the years, and the high regard with which he is held by Armenian civil society. And whether officially sanctioned or the lone

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work of an oddball political figure, the attack against one of Armenia's boldest human rights activists does not bode well for the post-election environment. END COMMENT.

PENNINGTON